

Meeting Minutes
Governmental Procedures and Structure Committee
Taxation and Budget Reform Commission
Senate Office Building, Room 37
Tallahassee, Florida
Friday, November 16, 2007
10:45 a.m. – 12:45 p.m.

(Committee Members: Alan Levine, Chair; Mike Hogan; Julia Johnson; Carlos Lacasa; Patricia Levesque; Jacinta Mathis; Nancy Riley; Darryl Rouson; Greg Turbeville; Ken Wilkinson; Brian Yablonski)

Commissioners Present:

Alan Levine, chair
Mike Hogan
Julia Johnson
Carlos Lacasa
Jacinta Mathis
Greg Turbeville
Ken Wilkinson
Brian Yablonski

Other Members Present:

Bob McKee

Excused Absences:

Patricia Levesque
Nancy Riley
Darryl Rouson

Chairman Levine called the meeting to order and the secretary called the roll at 10:55 a.m.

Larry Keough, of the Florida Catholic Conference, made a presentation to the committee on school choice programs.

According to Mr. Keough, the Florida Catholic Conference has had a longstanding interest in school choice programs. The Conference supported the A+ Plan under the belief that the Plan was a social justice program that would allow children without wealthy parents to attend better schools. The Conference believed that the program would have expanded to assist more students. Mr. Keough also noted that Commissioner Rouson had expressed concern about the lack of minority enrollment in Catholic schools.

Mr. Keough also explained that the Conference is concerned that school choice programs can inadvertently emphasize quantity over quality. School choice programs can lead to

the rapid creation of new private schools. Moreover, private schools could easily participate in the A+ program.

The Conference supports a constitutional amendment to allow for school choice programs. However, the Conference wants to limit the Legislature's. Additionally, the Conference would like to repeal the Blaine Amendment of Article I, section 3 of the Florida Constitution. The Conference believes that the Blaine Amendment originated out of an anti-Catholic bias. The Conference also believes that the uniformity requirement of Article IX, section 1 of the Florida Constitution must also be addressed to permit school choice.

Mr. Keough explained that the Conference's support of school choice programs is based on notions of social justice and civil rights. Mr. Keough also emphasized that the Conference believes that parents are best suited to determine where their children should go to school. The Conference has found that parents want to investigate the school options for their children.

Mr. Keough stated that the Conference is concerned that some private schools are not suited to meet the needs of children with disabilities. The Conference is also concerned that a constitutional amendment may give the Legislature too much flexibility to fund and regulate school choice programs.

Commissioner Mathis asked Mr. Keough his thoughts on the use of state money to pay tuition at religious schools. According to Mr. Keough, the Conference believes that school choice programs should not be structured in a way that undermines the public education system. Moreover, Mr. Keough explained that existing private schools have few spaces available for additional students.

Mr. Keough expressed concerns that school choice programs can come with restrictions that undermine the religious missions of Catholic schools. This is especially likely for private schools that become dependent on state funding.

Commissioner Turbeville asked whether the Blaine Amendment has a negative impact on Catholic hospitals. Mr. Keough responded that the Blaine Amendment does have an impact on Catholic hospitals, soup kitchens, and charities.

Commissioner Turbeville asked whether the Conference has drafted a constitutional amendment to address the Blaine Amendment. Mr. Keough responded that the Conference drafted language in the past. However, the Conference has an internal review process that it may have to follow before the language can be released.

Commissioner Hogan mentioned that he taught at a Baptist school for a year after he graduated from college. Commissioner Hogan's school had a policy of paying teachers the same salaries as public school teachers in the county. Commissioner Hogan asked how much Catholic school teachers are paid relative to public school teachers. Mr. Keough responded that Catholic schools attempt to pay teachers 80 percent of public

school salaries. As such, Catholic school teachers must believe in the ministry of the school over salaries.

Commissioner Hogan asked what it costs the Catholic Church to educate a child. Mr. Keough suggested that for grades K-8 the cost may be about \$6,000 to \$6,500. Mr. Keough estimated that a secondary education costs \$12,000 to \$14,000.

Commissioner Levine expressed concerns that a constitutional amendment addressing school choice programs with very specific language may limit the ability of the Legislature to adapt programs to changing times.

Commissioner Levine asked whether there was any evidence that voucher programs hurt public schools. Mr. Keough responded that there was no evidence that public schools were harmed by voucher programs. Moreover, the vouchers were for amounts less than what would have been spent on the children had they attended public schools.

After Mr. Keough's presentation, chair Levine led a discussion on measures that may come before the committee. Chair Levine noted that several submitted measures had been referenced to the committee. Chair Levine asked whether commissioners had any ideas that they wanted to pursue.

Commissioner Mathis expressed an interest in a measure to promote consolidation. Committee members also noted that Commissioner McKee had expressed an interest in developing a proposal to sunset independent special districts. Commissioner Johnson explained the process used by the Finance and Taxation Committee to identify and develop committee measures.

Commissioner Levine asked staff to identify all of the presentation topics that have come before the committee and asked the members to identify to staff topics of interest. Those topics will then be discussed during a conference call to determine whether the committee should address those through a measure sponsored by the committee.

The meeting adjourned at 12:09 p.m.